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EPA has bombshell on secondhand smoke, cancer

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In a long-delayed decision that could have a major impact on smoking in public places, the Environmental Protection Agency will report this week that secondhand cigarette smoke causes lung cancer in adults and greatly increases the risk of respiratory illnesses in children.

The report, to be released Thursday, blames the smoke for 400 to 7,000 lung-cancer deaths in U.S. non-smokers a year, with a "best estimate" of 3,000 cases. That's based on conservative assumptions, researchers noted, so the actual total could be higher.

Release of the report, after more than two years of revisions, would trigger an avalanche of federal, state and local regulations limiting where people can smoke, health advocates said.

"Having the EPA's imprimatur on this is extremely important," said Dr. Alfred Munzer, a spokesman for the Coalition on Smoking and Health, which includes the American Lung Association, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society.

Push for legislation

"We believe this will motivate state governments, local governments to enact further regulations limiting smoking in public places," Munzer said.

The report also could prod the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to regulate smoking in the workplace, health advocates said. Douglas Fuller, an OSHA spokesman, said the agency would weigh the EPA report carefully in its deliberations.

Munzer called on President Bush to use the report to justify an order to restrict smoking in federal buildings. It would do "a tremendous amount for the public health," Munzer said.

The report concludes that secondhand smoke is a proven human carcinogen, putting it in the same class as asbestos, benzene and radon, EPA officials said.

In addition to the lung-cancer deaths, they said, secondhand cigarette smoke increases the risk in children of pneumonia, bronchitis and middle-ear disorders, as well as the severity and frequency of asthma.

The EPA has decided to kill a second report that links secondhand smoke to 37,000 heart-disease deaths annually, said Robert Axelrad, head of the EPA's indoor-air division.

The link between cigarette smoke and heart disease is considered even more explosive than the lung-cancer link, because it implies that cigarette smoke causes roughly 10 times as many heart-disease as lung-cancer deaths.

The lung-cancer report was the focus of a massive lobbying campaign by the tobacco industry and its allies in Congress, who submitted hundreds of pages of documents to the EPA during the past two years in an effort to delay or water down the report.

Standing by conclusions

Despite the attack, the EPA refused to back away from its condemnation of tobacco smoke as a human carcinogen and a dangerous indoor-air pollutant, said EPA officials who worked on the report.

The report will be released by EPA Administrator William Reilly and Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan in Washington, according to EPA spokesman David Ryan.

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